



THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF BAGHESH/BITLIS AND TARON/MUSH

Robert H. Hewsen

Spring in a little Armenian town in the heart of Kurdistan: hills, bleakly bare and brown the rest of the year, were faintly green with a sparse evanescent herbage; poplars lining streets and waterways were spires of pale green smoke bursting into beryl flame where the sun shot through; fruit trees behind high garden walls were masses of white bloom. Everywhere there was the sound and scent of running water, for the city was a city of streams and waterfalls and fountains, a city high, high up among the mountains, so enfolded within its hills, so swallowed up in deep narrow ravines that the whole of it could not be seen at once from the top of any of the surrounding peaks.

Grace Knapp, *The Tragedy of Bitlis*, p. 9.

Of the many memorable vistas of Armenia, Taron must be one of the most beautiful. Here the Taurus Mountains seem to draw themselves apart, the northern and southern ranges suddenly retreating from one another to create a broad and level plain that recalls the open lands of central California. Through the green and fertile fields, ripe with grain and filled with flocks, the River Aratsani flows, watering a verdant and fertile country seeded with populous and prosperous villages. So high is the plain, absorbing so much of the mountains, that the peaks appear in the distance to be of small account and it is easy to forget how high above sea level we really are and how difficult the seemingly far off ranges are to scale or cross. The climate of the province is healthy but rigorous; summers are hot and winter lasts for up to seven months of the year. This is the plain of Mush, the ancient land of Taron/Turuberan (Western Armenian: Daron/Duruperan).

The term Taron refers to three different entities. In its original sense it is the name of the plain in southwest central Armenia just described.¹ Second, it is the name of a principality that eventually grew to coincide with the plain.² Third, it is the name of a larger area bounded by the surrounding mountains and including a number of principalities and other territories beyond the plain.³ It was the third and larger entity—a natural geographic unit—that formed the core of the Ottoman *vilayet* or province of Bitlis.⁴

The plain of Taron is one of the richest and most fertile regions in all Armenia. Occupying an area of some 1,200 square miles (3,000 square kilometers),⁵ it is a flat expanse of congealed lava that once flowed from the numerous volcanoes of Armenia's prehistoric past and which subsequently disintegrated into a rich, fertile volcanic soil. Through the plain of Taron flows the middle course of the southern arm of the Euphrates River, a branch usually called by the Armenians the Aratsani but occasionally also Yeprat (Euphrates).⁶ The Greeks and Romans knew this river as the Arsaias;⁷ the Arabs, the Arsanas.⁸ To the Turks, it is the Murat-chai. Like all Armenian rivers, it is unnavigable and not particularly well stocked with fish. It is, however, serviceable for

¹ Karo Sasuni (Garo Sassouni), *Patmutiun Taroni ashkharhi* [History of the Land of Taron] (Beirut: Sevan, 1956).

² "Msho Dasht" [The Plain of Mush], in *Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran* [Armenian Soviet Encyclopedia], vol. 7 (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1981), p. 659; "Taron," vol. 11 (1985), pp. 616-17, and "Taroni Ishkhanutun" [The Principality of Taron], pp. 617-18; S.T. Ermyan, *Hayastane est Ashkharhatsoys-i* [Armenia According to the Ashkharhatsoys] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1963), p. 85.

³ Ermyan, *Hayastane est Ashkharhatsoys-i*, p. 116.

⁴ Vital Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1890), vol. 2, chapter on Bitlis.

⁵ Ermyan, *Hayastane est Ashkharhatsoys-i*, p. 116.

⁶ "Aratsani," in *Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran*, vol. 1 (1974), pp. 684-85, citing the Assyro-Babylonian form Arsanias.

⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, Loeb Classical Library ed., V.xx.83. Ptolemy, *Geography*, trans. and ed. Edward L. Stevenson (New York: New York Public Library, 1932), V.xiii.13, curiously omits the name of this river, referring to it simply as "that river which flows into the Euphrates. . . ."

⁸ Josef Markwart, *Südarmenien und die Tigrisquellen nach griechischen und arabischen Geographen* (Vienna: Mekhitarist Press, 1930), p. 445 (quoting Masudi).

irrigation and has been used for this purpose since antiquity. The plain produces good crops of barley and rye and provides abundant pasturage for herds of cattle, sheep, and goats. In Ottoman times, more than two hundred villages filled the plain all centered around Mush,⁹ a logically-placed market town with a ruined fortress and a relatively unknown history.¹⁰

The earliest mention of Taron is perhaps the citing of districts with similar names in Urartian and Assyrian inscriptions, but here we must be very cautious because Urartian geography is highly uncertain and the location of Urartian place-names is often a matter of sheer guesswork. If we set aside these dubious toponyms, then we actually do not hear of Taron until the Roman period, and here again we are not exactly certain that Taron is to be identified with the place in question. Writing in the early first century A.D., the Greek geographer Strabo of Amasia mentions the Armenian acquisition of a place called Tamonitis from the Syrians in the second century B.C.¹¹ While several scholars have corrected this name to Taronitis, and this seems reasonable, the fact is that there was a fortress called Tman in southern Armenia in a territory that once did belong to Syria. It is not at all impossible, therefore, that Tamonitis is indeed the correct form and that it was Tman that was acquired at this time, not Taron.

Alas, this robs us of another five hundred years of Taronite history because the next mention of the district and the first definite reference to it occurs in the earliest Armenian historians, whose works date from the fifth century A.D. From these sources we detect that in ancient times there existed in the plain of Taron two distinct political units: first, the principality of the Sghkuni family centered in the castle of Oghakan,¹² and second, the shrine

⁹ Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie*, pp. 523-628.

¹⁰ For a description of Mush at the end of the nineteenth century, see H.F.B. Lynch, *Armenia: Travels and Studies*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green, 1901; Beirut: Khayats, 1965; New York: Armenian Prelacy, 1990), pp. 167-73.

¹¹ Strabo, *Geography*, Loeb Classical Library ed., XI.xiv.5.

¹² Pavstos Buzandatsi, *Patmutiun Hayots* [History of the Armenians], ed. Kerobe Patkanian (St. Petersburg, 1883; reprinted, Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1984); trans. and comm., with appendices, Nina G. Garsoïan, *The Epic Histories Attributed to P'awstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk')* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Garsoïan (p. 485) questions the original ownership of Oghakan and

of Ashtishat¹³ dedicated to the three principal pagan Armenian deities: Vahagn, Astghik, and Anahit.¹⁴ Obviously, the Aratsani River would have separated these entities, and fortunately we know which of the units lay east and which lay west of the river. The village of Oghakan to the west of the Aratsani places the principality of the Sghkuni family between that river and Bitlis. Surb Karapet, the monastery traditionally believed to have been built on the site of the temple of Ashtishat, lay in the territory west of the river and must have been the property of the temple state.¹⁵

A word about the institution of the temple state is in order.¹⁶ The temple state was a well-known phenomenon in Armenia and elsewhere in the Middle East. Such an entity consisted of a great shrine together with its surrounding territory, governed by its temple hierarchy as an autonomous state within the kingdom in which it lay, be that Greater Armenia, Lesser Armenia, Cilicia, Cappadocia, or Pontus. Such temples were the owners of vast lands and estates, worked by thousands of peasants who tilled the fields and tended the temple herds. The shrine itself was tended by a class of priests and priestesses, supported by a large staff of slaves, but also including musicians, singers, and dancers of both sexes, and a selection of sacred prostitutes, who served as vehicles of communion with the deity. These temples were the centers of great pilgrimages at certain times of the year and drew an enormous income from their devotees. The temple lands of Armenia, where there were at least eight major shrines of this kind,¹⁷ were under the supervision of the House of Vahevuni,

its surrounding principality by the Sghkunis.

¹³ Agatangeghos, *Patmutiun Hayots*, trans. and comm. Robert W. Thomson, *Agathangelos: History of the Armenians* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1976), chapters 809-15.

¹⁴ James R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 192-96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-94.

¹⁶ For a detailed description of the temple state of the goddess Anahtis (Anahit) at Erez (now Erzincan), see Strabo, *Geography*, XI.xiv.16.

¹⁷ See Agatangeghos, *History*. The shrines specified by Agatangeghos as having been destroyed by Saint Gregory the Illuminator were those of Anahit at Artashat and at Erazamoyun, of Tir on the road between Artashat and Erazamoyun (ch. 778), of Barshamin at Tordan (ch. 784), of Aramazd at Ani-Kamakh (ch. 785), of Anahit

hereditary high priests of Armenia, but it is unclear whether the Vahevuni owned all eight of these shrines outright or if some of them were under a local, perhaps hereditary priesthood of their own.¹⁸

The conversion of Armenia to Christianity in the early fourth century changed all of this. The Sghkuni family, apparently having rebelled against the king, was dispossessed, and its lands passed to the princely House of Mamikonian, hereditary commanders-in-chief of the royal army.¹⁹ The temple state of Ashtishat, on the other hand, was given to the Armenian Church and became its earliest spiritual center, soon passing to the House of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in its capacity as source for the hereditary chief bishops of the Armenian Church. Taron has great significance for the religious history of Armenia through the evidence that it was the earliest center of Christianity in the country, the first missionaries probably having come to this part of Armenia from Syria. The last of Saint Gregory's descendants in the male line was Isaac the Great (Surb Sahak), chief bishop of Armenia from 387 to 438. Upon his death, everything he owned passed to his only daughter Sahakanuys, who through her marriage to Prince Hamazasp, head of the great Mamikonian family, brought all of this land, including Ashtishat, to her husband, passing them to their son, Vardan the Brave.²⁰ In this way, the two halves of the plain of Taron were united into a single Mamikonian principality governed by a branch of the family endowed with its own bishop, who appears in the lists of Armenian bishops for the first time.²¹

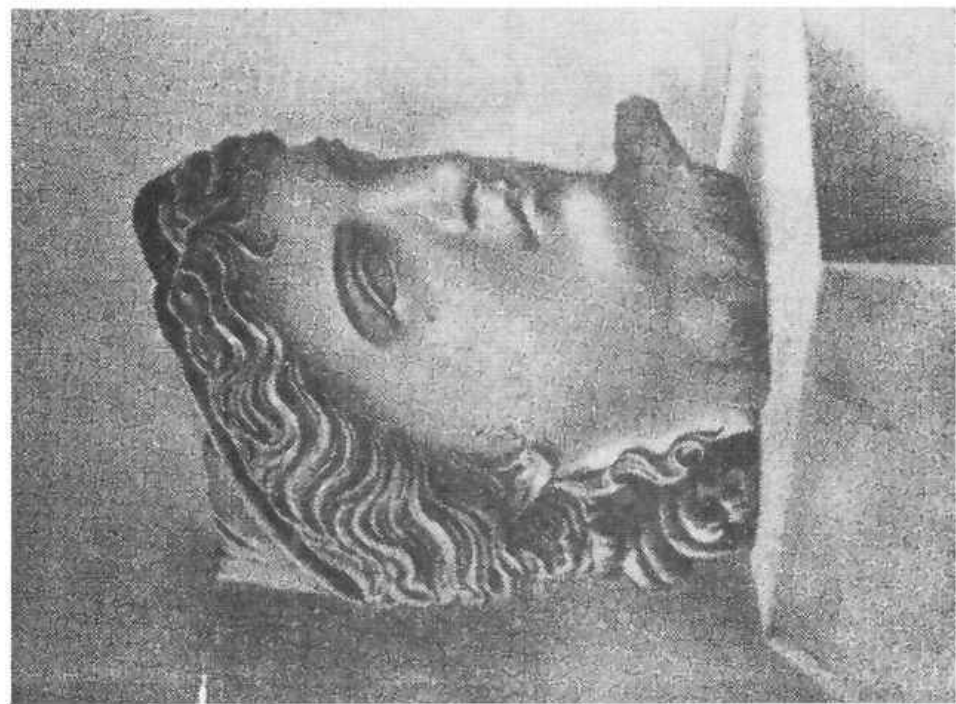
at Erez, of Nane at Til (ch. 786), of Mihr at Bagayarich (ch. 790), and of Vahagn, Anahit, and Astghik at Ashtishat (ch. 809). Agatangeghos cites the last one as the eighth, but if we count Erazamoy (and the wording makes this uncertain), the total destroyed was nine. These were by no means the only temples in Armenia, but they appear to have been the most famous and the ones of national significance.

¹⁸ Cyril Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1963), p. 215.

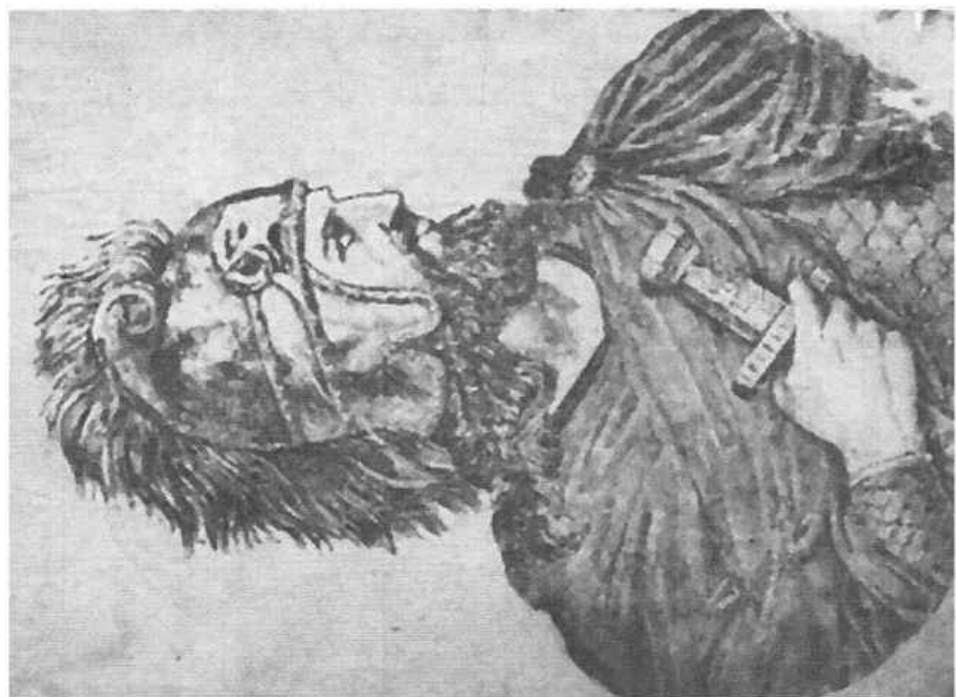
¹⁹ Ibid., p. 209; *Moses Khorenats'i: History of the Armenians*, trans. and comm. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), II.84.

²⁰ Toumanoff, *Christian Caucasian History*, p. 209.

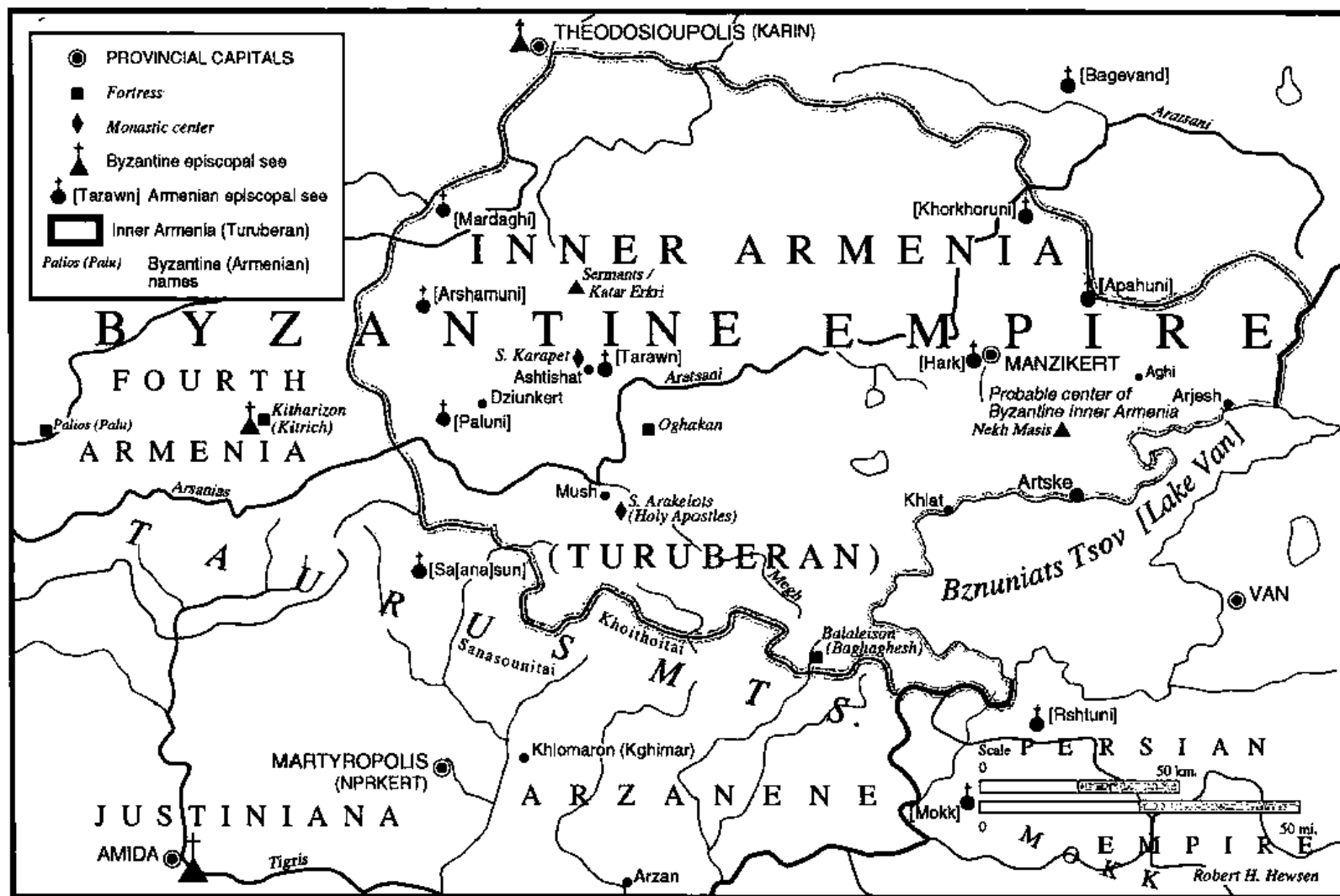
²¹ Robert H. Hewsen, "An Ecclesiastical Analysis of the Naxarar System," in *From Byzantium to Iran: Studies in Honour of Nina Garsoïan*, ed. Jean-Pierre Mahé and Robert W. Thomson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 124.



Goddess Anahit (Garegin Episkopos Trabizoni)



Rendition of Vardan Mamikonian



THE BYZANTINE PROVINCE OF INNER ARMENIA (TURUBERAN)

The shrine at Ashtishat had long been replaced by some kind of a religious institution, gradually evolving into a monastery, though this was by no means the only monastic institution in the principality. Ultimately, there were at least twenty-five major monasteries in the region, counting the ones in Sasun and those in the vicinity of Bitlis.²² The famed Surb Karapet of Mush on the slopes of Mount Karke, also known as Innakian or Glakavank, and the great monastery of the Apostles (Arakelots) southwest of Mush remained important religious establishments until World War I. Surb Karapet, erected on the site of the shrine of Ashtishat and dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, was the sepulchral abbey of the Mamikonian family and also contained the tomb of Athenagines, great-grandson of Gregory the Illuminator. Many of these monasteries were cultural centers and important scriptoria.

There were, of course, a number of forts and fortresses in Taron,²³ chief among them being Oghakan, ancestral seat of the Sghkunis, which the Romans knew as Olane (Olakane?)²⁴ or Volandum (Volakanum?).²⁵ After the loss of the principality of Aghdznik to the Persians in 387, however, Taron became a frontier province, and thereafter a line of defensive positions was constructed in the part of the Taurus Mountains known as Sasun which not only bordered Taron but now formed the frontier of all of central Armenia on the south.²⁶ In these mountain fastnesses there arose several other monasteries, the most important being Surb Aghberik or Vandir, which was the seat of the bishop of Sasun.²⁷

²² Robert H. Hewsen, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), maps 82, 193, 194.

²³ Mikayel Hovhannesian, *Hayastani berdere* [The Fortresses of Armenia] (Venice: Mekhitarist Press, 1970), pp. 177-224.

²⁴ Strabo, *Geography*, XI.xiv.6.

²⁵ Tacitus, *Annals*, Loeb Classical Library ed., XIII.xxxix.

²⁶ Robert H. Hewsen, *The Geography of Ananias of Širak (Ašxarhac'oyc'): The Long and the Short Recensions* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1992), pp. 162-67.

²⁷ Jean-Michel Thierry, "Sasun: Voyages archéologiques," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 23 (1992): 315-91. This is the first modern survey of the region since World War I.

Taruberan

We know little of what was happening in Taron in the one and one-half centuries that followed the unification of the plain into a single principality in 438. In 591, however, after a long war with Persia, the Byzantines acquired all of central Armenia which they organized into three provinces: Lower Armenia, Deep Armenia, and Inner Armenia. From Armenian sources, it is obvious that Lower Armenia refers to the plain of Ararat, which is indeed the lowest part of the Armenian Plateau, and that Deep Armenia refers to the dense and almost impenetrable mountains of Tayk—the region of Ardahan.²⁸ Inner Armenia, then, by a process of elimination, can only be the southwestern part of central Armenia likewise occupied by the Byzantines at this time. A few decades later, we have among our Armenian sources the famous geographical text known as the *Ashkharhatsoyts*, which for the first time mentions a large area of Armenia identified as *Taruberan* or *e koghmn Taraunoy* (Taruberan which is the region of Taron).²⁹ Following Adontz,³⁰ this new Taruberan or Greater Taron we may take to have been the Armenian name for the Byzantine province of Inner Armenia. It was a political unit based on the configuration of the surrounding mountains which for the first time grouped Taron with the neighboring principalities and districts to form a larger entity than the plain itself. This was an administrative formation so natural from a geographical point of view that it would reappear to a great extent a thousand years later in the Ottoman province of Bitlis. This greater Taron included, besides Taron itself, the six principalities of Palunik, Arshamunik, Varazhnunik, Khorkhorunik, Apahunik, and Aghiovit, as well as the two former principalities of Bznunik and Hark (both of which had long since passed to the Armenian Church). It also contained the eight princeless districts of Erevark, Mardaghi, Dasnavork, Tvaratsatap,

²⁸ For a survey of the Byzantine reorganization of Armenia under the Emperor Maurice in 591, see Hewsén, *Ashkharhatsoyts*, pp. 19-27.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ N[ikoghayos] Adontz, *Armenia v epokhu Iustiniana* (St. Petersburg, 1908), chs. 11 and 12; trans. and comm. Nina G. Garsoïan, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian* (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1970), pp. 179, 242-46. Further citations of Adontz refer to this translation.

Kori, Khoyt, Dalar, and Aspakuniats Dzor, all of which belonged either to one or another principality or to the Church.³¹

Altogether, greater Taron or Taruberan³² comprised some 3,000 square miles (7,700 square kilometers), with its center set probably at the town of Manazkert, the only town in the area important enough to have its own bishop. Bishops of the Armenian Church were normally appointed to princely courts rather than to towns in early Christian Armenia, and apart from the one at Manazkert we know that in this area bishops existed in Taron, Tar(u)beran (probably Hark), and Apahunik by 450; in Hark (probably the same as the bishop of Tar(u)beran, who disappears at this time); and also in Arshamunik and Khorkhorunik by 505.³³

In 855-62, during the period of Arab domination in Armenia, the Mamikonians lost Taron to the rising House of Bagratuni,³⁴ which set Taron up as a separate principality governed by a junior line of the family. The princes of this line were courted by the Byzantine Empire that adjoined Taron on the west and were early endowed with the Byzantine title *curopalate*.³⁵ For this reason the new Bagratuni principality is often referred to as the *curopalatate* of Taron.³⁶ The Mamikonians, however, though dispossessed by the Bagratunis, did not disappear during the Byzantine occupation. A branch known as the Chordvanelis remained in Armenia.³⁷ Indeed, having taken refuge in the mountains of Sasun, they

³¹ For the districts of Taruberan, see Hewsen, *Aṣṣarḥac'oyc'*; Adontz, *Armenia*, pp. 242-46; Eremyan, *Hayastane est Ashkharhatsoyts-i*, II.6. For Hark passing to the Church, see *Epic Histories*, III.4. For Bznunik, see Adontz, *Armenia*, p. 245.

³² The exact meaning of the name Taruberan, also written Turuberan, is uncertain. Eremyan, *Hayastane*, p. 85, altered it to *Tauruberan* and related it to the name of the Taurus Mountains suggesting that it meant "mouth" (Armenian: *beran*) or "entrance to the Taurus" (*Tauroy beran*). The origin of the Armenian name Taron is not known.

³³ For the ecclesiastical arrangements prior to the Arab invasions of the seventh century, see Adontz, *Armenia*, ch. 12, and Hewsen, "Analysis," *passim*.

³⁴ Toumanoff, *Christian Caucasian History*, p. 210.

³⁵ Cyril Toumanoff, "Armenia and Georgia," in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 4: *The Byzantine Empire*, pt. 1: *Byzantium and Its Neighbours*, ed. J.M. Hussey et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 593-637.

³⁶ Hewsen, *Atlas*, map 82.

³⁷ Cyril Toumanoff, *Les dynasties de la Caucasic chrétienne* (Rome: [n.p.], 1990), p. 337, genealogical charts 14, 15, 71.

survived both the Seljuk Turks and the Mongols, but early in the thirteenth century the last remnants of the family migrated to Cilician Armenia, and Taron was left bereft of its ancestral Armenian rulers.³⁸ It was probably the emergence of this Chordvaneli principality in Sasun that led to the establishment of an episcopal see of Sasun in precisely this period.³⁹

Again, we are poorly informed about the history of the curo-palatate of Taron although during this period local authors produced a historical romance purporting to be a history of this region written by a certain Zenob of Glak and Hovhannes Mamikonian, a largely fictitious work probably compiled in the tenth century.⁴⁰ In the mid-tenth century, the Byzantine Empire began its third expansion eastwards into Armenia, Taron becoming its first acquisition when it was annexed and reorganized as the theme (military province) of Taron in 968.⁴¹ Branches of its Bagratuni ruling house, ultimately dispossessed, settled in the empire as the Byzantine families of Tornices, Taronitai, and Musele-Crinites.⁴² The Byzantines held Taron for just over a century until after the battle of Manazkert (Manzikert) in 1071, when it was overrun by the Seljuk Turks.

During these hundred years, the Byzantines advanced a firm ecclesiastical presence in Taron, establishing a number of Chalcedonian episcopal sees in the area, most of them centered at the local monasteries.⁴³ We are not certain where the resolutely urban-

³⁸ The Chordvanelis appear to have been the ancestors of the Georgian princely family of Tumanishvili, known in the Russian Empire as Toumanoff. See *ibid.*, p. 337.

³⁹ Hewsen, "Analysis," p. 124.

⁴⁰ Hovhannes Mamikonian (pseudo), *Patmutiun Taraunoy* [History of Taron], trans. and comm. Levon Avdoyan, *Pseudo-Yovhannēs Mamikonean: The History of Tarōn* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).

⁴¹ For details of the Byzantine administrative organization of the theme of Taron, see Karen N. Yuzbashian, "L'administration byzantine en Arménie aux X^e-XI^e siècles," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 10 (1973-74): 139-88.

⁴² Toumanoff, *Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 211-38.

⁴³ For details of the Byzantine ecclesiastical organization of the theme of Taron, see V.A. Arutiunova-Fidanian, *Armiane-khalkidonity na vostochnykh granitsakh vizantiiskoi imperii (XI)* [Armeno-Chalcedonians on the Eastern Frontier of the Byzantine Empire (11th Century)] (Erevan: Hayastan, 1980), and her "Some Aspects of the Military-Administrative Districts and of Byzantine Administration in Armenia

oriented Byzantines fixed their authority in the theme, but the town of Mush (which they called Mous) seems a likely candidate. Little is known of the early history of the town of Mush, but its ancient name assures us that it has probably existed from very early times. The Mushki, as the Assyrians called the Phrygians, invaded this part of Armenia in pre- and early-Urartian times, and the name Mush appears to be a memory of their settlement.⁴⁴ The Mamikonian family favored the name *Mushegh*, which seems to be based on the name of this town, *Mush-egh* being a locative "of Mush."⁴⁵

Under the Seljuk Turks, who overran Armenia in the eleventh century, south-central Armenia passed to a Muslim dynasty known to history as the Shah Armen or Shah-i Arman, that is, "King of Armenia."⁴⁶ The Shah Armen held this territory, including Taron, almost until the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, but they did not rule Sasun in the southern mountains where a line of obscure princes continued to hold sway, one of whom in 1123 commissioned the famed doors for the monastery of the Holy Apostles at Mush, now preserved in the State Historical Museum in Erevan.⁴⁷

Bitlis

It was in the period of the rule of the Mongol dynasty known as the Ilkhanids that the Kurds appear to have emerged in this part of Armenia, moving into the vacuum left by the disappearance of any other firm authority and gradually erecting a Kurdish emirate centered at Bitlis, the old Armenian fortress once known in Armenian as Baghaghesh and later as Baghesh. Under the emir ruled a number of vassals, all Kurds, one of them centered at Mush and owning its fertile plain. These emirates continued to exist after the fall of the Ilkhanids, throughout the period of the

during the 11th Century," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 20 (1986-87).

⁴⁴ Toumanoff, *Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 56-57.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211n238.

⁴⁶ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 193, s.v. "Shah-i Arman." See also Thomas A. Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey: An Architectural and Archaeological Survey*, vol. 1 (London: Pindar Press, 1987), pp. 291-342.

⁴⁷ Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey*, pp. 328-30.

Turkmen wars that followed. They survived the coming of the Ottoman Turks and, indeed, were not suppressed until the nineteenth century. It was during the time of the Kurdish emirs that the Jesuits founded a mission station at Bitlis in 1685 and that the famed Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi left us his elaborate description of Bitlis as it was in his time.⁴⁸ Kurdish rule does not appear to have been especially onerous for the local Armenians, who early on must have come to an accommodation with their masters. Several of the local monasteries became cultural centers under the rule of the emirs, especially Amrdolu, while Surb Karapet remained the most important shrine in Western Armenia. The Muslims called it Chengelli Kilise (Church of the Bells) because by a special dispensation it alone was allowed to ring bells, a privilege normally denied to churches in the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁹

During the early Ottoman period, the Turks maintained only two jurisdictions on the Armenian Plateau which were directly under the rule of the central government: one a *pashalik* or military province centered at Erzerum, and the other, a smaller *pashalik* centered at Van.⁵⁰ In 1875, however, about thirty years after the suppression of the last Kurdish emirs, the southwestern districts of Erzerum were detached to form a new vilayet or civil province centered at Bitlis.⁵¹ In this way, both the old Koghm Taronoy or "Region of Taron" described in the *Ashkharhatsoys* and the later Kurdish emirate re-emerged in part as the vilayet of Bitlis. In 1883, the *kaza* (district) of Siirt (Sghert; Sairt) was taken from the vilayet of Diarbekir and added to that of Bitlis, greatly enlarging it on the south. This transfer of territory brought into the vilayet a large number of Chaldean Catholics, Assyrian Christians formerly members of the Nestorian Church who under

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 330-36. Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatname* [Book of Travels], trans. of first part by Ritter Joseph von Hammer, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1834-1850), 2 vols.

⁴⁹ For the only detailed description of Surb Karapet in a Western language, see Lynch, *Armenia*, vol. 2, pp. 176-81.

⁵⁰ Mesrob K. Krikorian, *Armenians in the Service of the Ottoman Empire, 1860-1908* (Vienna: Routledge, 1977), pp. 26-31.

⁵¹ Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie*, p. 523.

Jesuit influence had accepted the Catholic faith in the seventeenth century.⁵² Five battalions of infantry and one of cavalry, together with a gendarmerie corps of four battalions of both infantry and cavalry, were spread through the enlarged province. Their headquarters was at Bitlis as was that of the post and telegraph service. Despite the district's remoteness, the soldiers of the gendarmerie provided a regular postal service between Bitlis, Mush, and Erzerum, and an irregular one between Bitlis and Diarbekir.⁵³

Although the city of Bitlis stood on an important road connecting the Armenian Plateau with the Mesopotamian plain, the plain of Mush did not lie along any major trade routes in the Ottoman period, and except for the German Karl H.E. Koch⁵⁴ and Hermann Abich,⁵⁵ few foreigners passed through it. In the late nineteenth century, however, Taron was visited by a few other European travelers, the most important being Vital Cuinet surveying the Ottoman Empire for the Ottoman Debt Administration in the 1880s⁵⁶ and H.F.B. Lynch and F. Oswald surveying for the British a few years later.⁵⁷ Describing Bitlis at the turn of the twentieth century, Lynch states that he found the houses of the town to be the best built in this part of Asia, though he cites as disadvantages the oppressive heat of summer and the heavy accumulation of snow during the colder parts of the year. The city was not without its amenities, however. Besides noting that its houses were built of hewn stone rather than of the more common adobe, he lists the American mission station that was founded in 1858, a Turkish high school, and a British consulate, as well as several mosques, extensive bazaars, and an unusually large number of fountains and trees. The town also possessed a church of the Syrian Jacobites, a sect in communion with the Armenians. In the vicinity of the city still stood several monasteries.

⁵² Ibid.

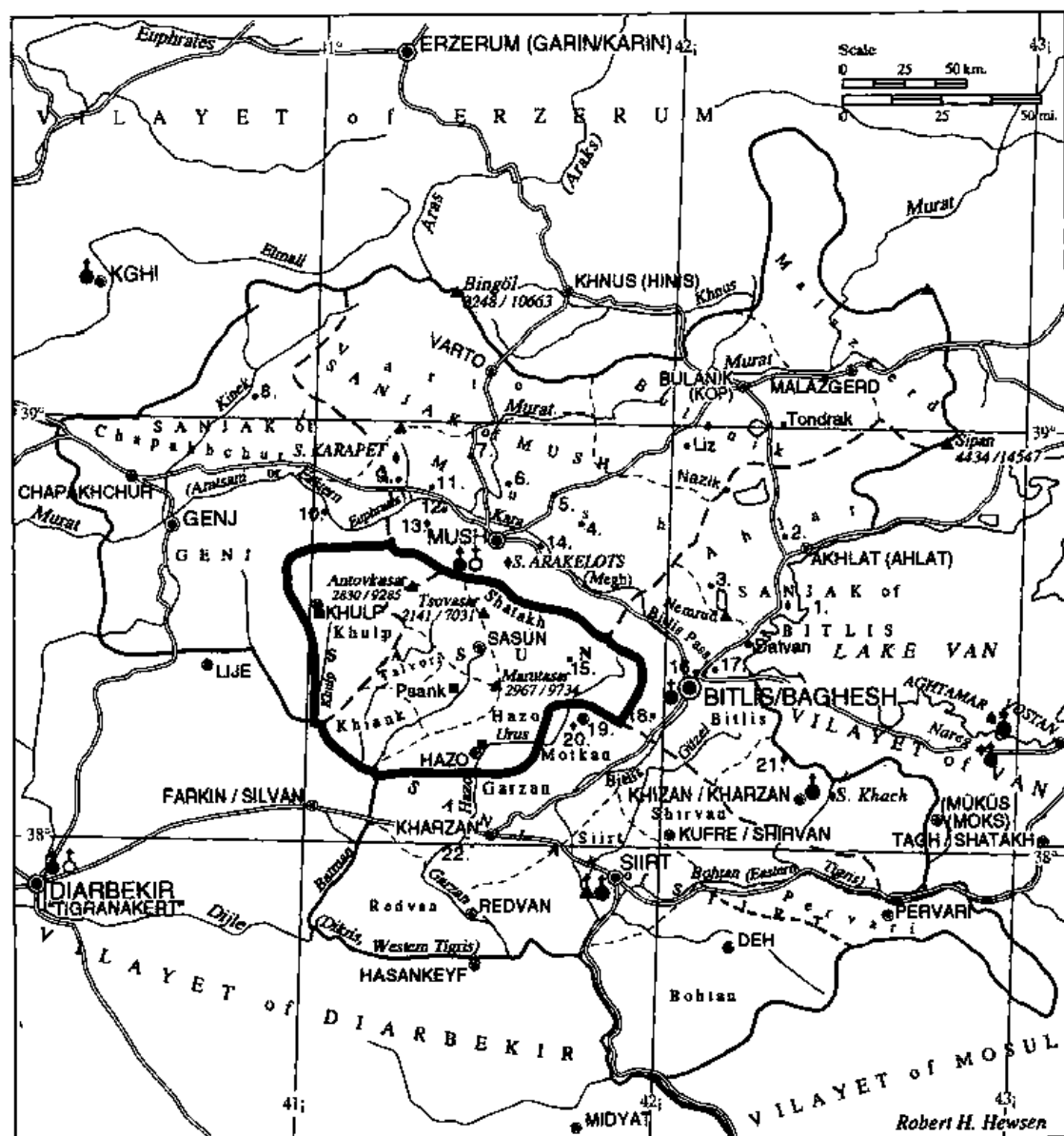
⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Karl Heinrich Emil Koch, *Wanderungen im Oriente, während der Jahre 1843 und 1844*, pt. 2: *Reise im pontischen Gebirge und türkischen Armenien* (Weimar: Verlag des Landes-Industrie-Comptoirs, 1846).

⁵⁵ Hermann Abich, *Geologische Forschungen in den kaukasischen Ländern*, vol. 3 (Vienna: Alfred Hölder, 1878-1887).

⁵⁶ Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie*.

⁵⁷ Lynch, *Armenia*, vol. 2, ch. 6.



- Vilayet (provincial) capital
- Sanjak (county) capital
- Kaza (district) center
- Kurdish tribal center
- ◆ Armenian monastery

The Vilayet of Bitlis

- ✙ Arm. Catholikos ✙ archbishop ✙ bishop ✙ prelate
- ✙ Armenian Catholic (Uniate) archbishop ✙ bishop
- ✙ Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) bishop

Armenian districts under Kurdish domination

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. S. Astvatsatsin Mon. | 12. Khoronk |
| 2. Madnavank | 13. Eghrduti vank |
| 3. Odzkaghak | 14. Gomk |
| 4. Hatsek | 15. Khoyt |
| 5. Tsrunk | 16. Babshen |
| 6. Oghakan | 17. Por |
| 7. Derek (Ashtishat) | 18. Bakhshan |
| 8. Gvars | 19. Motkan |
| 9. Meghdi | 20. Marutavank |
| 10. Gencköy | 21. S. Astvatsatsin-Eotn-Sirdir Mon. |
| 11. Ziyaret | 22. Ruins of Arzan (Tigranakert?) |

THE VILAYET OF BITLIS

Lynch thought the town of Mush less favored, its houses poorly built of rubble stone faced with mud and only occasionally white-washed and its bazaar small and dirty. He also described Mush as the most misgoverned town in the Ottoman Empire and found the population generally wretched, especially the Armenians whom he characterized as being in a state of terror. The town possessed, however, three fine khans, two well-built mosques, four Armenian Apostolic churches, and one church belonging to the Armenian Catholics.⁵⁸ As elsewhere on the Armenian Plateau, both of these localities, Bitlis and Mush, despite the problems observed, appear to have grown steadily in population and amenities over the course of the nineteenth century, a phenomenon that does not accord well with the image of a steadily declining Ottoman Empire beset in part by the ruin of the countryside. The reasons behind this discrepancy need to be explored.

This is not the place to enter into the much discussed and still controversial subject of the size of the population of the vilayet of Bitlis and of the towns of Bitlis or Mush or of the relative proportion of one element in the population to another.⁵⁹ It is enough to say that it was quite heterogeneous. Cuinet shows that the vilayet contained a mixed population of Muslims, Armenians, Syrian Jacobites, and Yezidi Kurds, with a small number of Greeks, Assyrians, Jews, Copts, and others.⁶⁰ The large number of Kurds in the province, otherwise unmentioned by Cuinet, was undoubtedly subsumed under the term "Muslims." As in the adjoining vilayet of Van, Turks were relatively few. Even today, with the Armenian population gone, Bitlis remains the domain of the Kurd.

The Armenian Church divided the vilayet of Bitlis into three

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ For studies on the subject, see Justin McCarthy, *Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1983); Kemal Karpat, *Ottoman Population, 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Levon Marashlian, *Politics and Demography: Armenians, Turks and Kurds in the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Zoryan Institute, 1991); Raymond H. Kévorkian and Paul B. Paboudjian, *Les Arméniens dans l'Empire ottoman à la veille du Génocide* (Paris: Éditions d'Art et d'Histoire ARHIS, 1992).

⁶⁰ Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie*, pp. 526-33.

dioceses: Mush under an archbishop, with bishops at Bitlis and Sghert. According to the Armenian Patriarchate, the province in 1910 contained 462 parishes with 361 churches, an unusual situation in which some 100 parishes supposedly had no houses of worship.⁶¹ Within the Armenian Catholic Church, the vilayets of Van and Bitlis together formed a single diocese, the bishop residing in Mush. Armenian Catholicism, however, after more than 200 years was obviously dying in the region. In 1914, the plain of Mush contained, besides 125 Armenian Catholic households in Mush itself, only three Armenian Catholic villages in its environs.⁶² Bitlis, once a center of Jesuit missionary endeavor, had seen its Catholic parish disintegrate by 1913, the Jesuits having long ago transferred their mission to the more salubrious climate of Mosul far to the south in the Mesopotamian lowlands. There were Protestants in Bitlis, the result of American missionary activity, but few in Mush.⁶³ Chaldean Catholics, as already noted, were found in great numbers in the kaza of Siirt where no fewer than three of their episcopal sees were located. The town of Bitlis also had a Chaldean Catholic bishop of its own.

The vilayet of Bitlis was hard hit in the Armenian Genocide. Sasun, of course, was the scene of massacres as early as 1894, and Mush and Bitlis suffered in the massacres of 1895, between 600 and 800 Armenians being killed in the town of Bitlis alone and many more being forced to embrace Islam in the villages. In the summer of 1915, however, the entire Armenian population of the vilayet was massacred or deported to Mesopotamia.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Malachia Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia*, 2d rev. ed. (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1955), p. 206; Kévorkian and Paboudjian, *Les Arméniens dans l'Empire ottoman*, s.v. "Bitlis."

⁶² Jean Naslian, *Les mémoires de Mgr. Jean Naslian, Evêque de Trébizonde* (Beirut: [Vienna: Mekhitarist Press], 1951); Kévorkian and Paboudjian, *Les Arméniens dans l'Empire ottoman*, s.v. "Bitlis."

⁶³ Grace H. Knapp, *The Tragedy of Bitlis* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1919), describes the mission at Bitlis and its work in detail.

⁶⁴ *Haykakan Harts'i Hanragitaran* [Encyclopedia of the Armenian Question] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1999), s.v. "Bitlis," pp. 84-85; "Mush," p. 343; "Sasun," pp. 401-04; Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), pp. 158, 213; Arnold J. Toynbee, ed., *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon by Viscount Bryce*, Miscellaneous no. 31, 1916 (London: Sir Joseph

Eghishe, the Armenian bishop of Bitlis, was burned alive, together with the Chaldean Catholic Bishop, Monsignor Addaisher. The Armenian Catholic Bishop of Mush, Monsignor Hagop (Hakob) Topuzian, was killed soon after.⁶⁵

In the new Turkish republic established by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) after the world war, a major change was made in the administration of the Turkish provinces. The former Ottoman vilayets were dissolved and with certain alterations here and there their divisions or *sanjaks* were retained as the provinces of the new Turkey, the term for these sanjaks now being *il*. In this way the erstwhile principality of Taron survives as the *il* of Mush, but the old Region of Taron of Greater Armenia and the Ottoman vilayet of Bitlis no longer exist.

Today, the plain of Mush remains as rich and fertile as ever but is still greatly underpopulated. Mush, however, has become a bustling town with a good hotel and several Western style shops and has grown to engulf certain former Armenian villages that have now become suburbs of the town. In one of them an obliging Muslim opens the door of a storage room where he shows a niche marked with crosses and blackened with candle smoke. Here, he relates, the old women used to come and pray when he was a boy. The saddest thing to note in the modern Taron is the wholesale changing of the Armenian names of the villages of the plain—Tvnik, Khoronk, Norshen, Marnik, Vardenis, Hatsek, Til, Oghakan, Meghdi, Tsronk, Arnist, Goms; the villages remain but the names are gone. The most touching experience, however, is the warmth of certain individuals who come to Mush to meet the occasional Armenian who visits the town simply because a grandmother was Armenian, and they have never met any other Armenians before.⁶⁶ Together, they sit and chat, the native and the visitor, but it is doubtful if they say much about the painful past.

Causton and Sons, 1916), pp. 79-98.

⁶⁵ Naslian, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, pp. 145-46.

⁶⁶ Hewsen, personal observations, 1998, 1999.